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## The meaning of internationalism when the Cubans “exporting” the revolution or becoming “the good colonizers”?

Raquel Ribeiro

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## Abstract

Between 1975 and 1991, Cuba deployed to Angola more than 300 000 military personnel (of which some 2 000 lost their lives), and around 50 000 civilians worked as doctors, nurses, teachers or engineers. The cultural impact of the presence of Cubans in the first half of the civil war in post-independence Angola marked deeply a whole generation of men and women and is still pretty much under-researched. In this article, I discuss the meaning of internationalism in Angola for Cuban society, resorting to sources (literature, poetry, testimony and political speeches) that have been addressing the Angolan conflict and analysing the meaning of Cuba's internationalist policy stemming from both Cuba and abroad. By showing the mobilizing and activist character of the Cuban experience in Angola, through accounts on internationalism, my argument is that, rather than imposing themselves in a foreign nation, the Cubans were attempting to incorporate Angola in their own national narrative, in the sense of Eric Hobsbawm's "invention of tradition".

## Résumé

« Exporter » la révolution ou devenir de « bons colonisateurs » ? Le sens de l'internationalisme cubain en Angola.

Entre 1975 et 1991, Cuba a déployé en Angola plus de 300 000 soldats (dont 2 000 ont perdu la vie), et envoyé 50 000 civils environ comme médecins, infirmières, enseignants ou ingénieurs. Cette présence cubaine dans la guerre civile postérieure à l'indépendance en Angola a eu un impact culturel profond sur toute une génération d'hommes et de femmes. Elle est restée très peu étudiée. Cet article interroge le sens qu'a eu l'engagement internationaliste en Angola pour la société cubaine, en s'appuyant sur des sources diverses (littérature, poésie, témoignages et discours politiques) qui ont évoqué le conflit en Angola et ont analysé l'internationalisme cubain. En mettant en évidence à partir de témoignages la mobilisation et le militantisme qui caractérisent l'expérience cubaine en Angola, je montre que les Cubains n'ont pas tant cherché à s'imposer à une autre nation qu'à intégrer l'Angola dans leur propre récit national  $\phi$  au sens de « l'invention de la tradition » d'Eric Hobsbawm.

# **The meaning of internationalism in Angola: were the Cubans “exporting” the revolution or becoming “the good colonizers”?**

Raquel RIBEIRO \*

**Résumé : « Exporter » la révolution ou devenir de « bons colonisateurs » ? Le sens de l'internationalisme cubain en Angola.**

Entre 1975 et 1991, Cuba a déployé en Angola plus de 300 000 soldats (dont 2 000 ont perdu la vie), et envoyé 50 000 civils environ comme médecins, infirmières, enseignants ou ingénieurs. Cette présence cubaine dans la guerre civile postérieure à l'indépendance en Angola a eu un impact culturel profond sur toute une génération d'hommes et de femmes. Elle est restée très peu étudiée. Cet article interroge le sens qu'a eu l'engagement internationaliste en Angola pour la société cubaine, en s'appuyant sur des sources diverses (littérature, poésie, témoignages et discours politiques) qui ont évoqué le conflit en Angola et ont analysé l'internationalisme cubain. En mettant en évidence à partir de témoignages la mobilisation et le militantisme qui caractérisent l'expérience cubaine en Angola, je montre que les Cubains n'ont pas tant cherché à s'imposer à une autre nation qu'à intégrer l'Angola dans leur propre récit national – au sens de « l'invention de la tradition » d'Eric Hobsbawm.

## **Abstract**

Between 1975 and 1991, Cuba deployed to Angola more than 300 000 military personnel (of which some 2 000 lost their lives), and around 50 000 civilians worked as doctors, nurses, teachers or engineers. The cultural impact of the presence of Cubans in the first half of the civil war in post-independence Angola marked deeply a whole generation of men and women and is still pretty much under-researched. In this article, I discuss the meaning of internationalism in Angola for Cuban society, resorting to sources (literature, poetry, testimony and political speeches) that have been addressing the Angolan conflict and analysing the meaning of Cuba's internationalist policy stemming from both Cuba and abroad. By showing the mobilizing and activist character of the Cuban experience in Angola, through accounts on internationalism, my argument is that, rather than

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imposing themselves in a foreign nation, the Cubans were attempting to incorporate Angola in their own national narrative, in the sense of Eric Hobsbawm's "invention of tradition".

The presence of Cubans in the first half of the civil war in post-independence Angola (between 1975 and 1991) marked deeply a whole generation of men and women. Its relevance in both Cuba and Angola is yet to be fully grasped in social, economic and cultural terms. For over 15 years, Cuba deployed to Angola more than 300 000 military personnel (of which some 2 000 lost their lives), and around 50 000 civilians worked as doctors, nurses, teachers or engineers.

But why were the Cubans in Angola? Why is it not possible to write the history of postcolonial Angola without understanding the impact of the Cuban presence in that African country, which by 1975 was emerging from more than 400 years of colonialism under Portuguese rule, 11 000 km away from that small Caribbean island, to which Cuba had virtually no links but the "blood" of the thousands of African slaves brought centuries before to the sugarcane plantations in the island? <sup>1</sup>

In this article, I shall discuss the meaning of internationalism in Angola for Cuban society, resorting to sources (literature, poetry, testimony and political speeches) that have been addressing the Angolan conflict and analysing the meaning of Cuba's internationalist policy stemming from both Cuba and abroad.

One should thus ask: could the Cuban presence in post-independence Angola be read as a partnership in the realms of a military and ideological "cooperation"? Or should it, instead, be understood as a military "intervention" *tout court*, thus a foreign interference in Angola, supporting the self-proclaimed Angolan People's Party, the Marxist liberation movement MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola)? This essay questions to what extent Cuba was "exporting" (or not) its revolution to Africa, "imposing" its socialist model in Angola and therefore becoming, in the words of Christine Hatzky, "the good colonizer[s]" <sup>2</sup>. By showing the mobilizing and activist character of the Cuban experience in Angola, through examples of testimonies of internationalism, my argument is that, rather than imposing themselves in a foreign nation, the Cubans were attempting to incorporate Angola in their own national narrative, in the sense of Eric Hobsbawm's "invention of tradition" <sup>3</sup>. Although that narrative has been built from 1975 until the present day, when the Cubans left

1. Fidel Castro, *Fidel Castro Speeches – Cuba's Internationalist Foreign Policy 1975–80*, vol. I, New York, Pathfinder, 1981, p. 107.

2. Christine Hatzky, "'Os Bons Colonizadores': Cuba's Educational Mission in Angola, 1976–1991", *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, vol. 9, n° 1, January, 2008, pp. 53–68.

3. See Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Angola in 1991 there was a “wall of silence” built around the war. That “wall” could be read as hidden trauma or a syndrome resting unconsciously in the back of Cubans’ minds waiting to be awakened. It was only in the 2000s that the Cubans began to break that silence and bring to the surface what had remained veiled for so long. By then, the narrative about Angola was precisely addressed (or recovered) in that same “invented” tradition of the 1970s, that is, through the assimilation of the Angolan narrative into Cuban national identity.

In order to address this “narrative” it should be noted that doing research in Cuban Studies has its challenges: language is many times “loaded” by ideology, discourse is still interpreted through the gaze of a “Cold War rhetoric”, i.e., by taking sides, and accessing materials (historical sources, archives or even people) is still constrained by power structures, lack of internet resources or the poor conditions of some libraries. When historical sources can be controlled by ideological commitments, cultural productions could be seen as alternative modes of understanding and analyzing societies and their inner tensions, thus contributing to “forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences”<sup>4</sup>. Literature, poetry, testimony, or even film, from both Cuba and abroad – that is, produced by Cuban *émigrés* in the diaspora but also by Cubans on the island, some of them strong supporters of the revolution, others more critical – should be seen as sources that attest to intellectual exchanges between countries or even political tensions amongst members of a society. As such, in societies like Cuba or Angola, where democratic transparency is still not on the table, literature and culture could become a first step towards understanding how historical moments, such as the presence of Cubans in Africa, changed and affected those who have experienced them.

## 1. Previous relationships with Africa

Piero Gleijeses has shown in *Conflicting Missions* that Cuba decided to participate in the Angolan conflict not as a Soviet proxy but according to its own set of principles<sup>5</sup>. Essentially disseminated by the USA, the “Soviet proxy” theory tended to ignore “the long history of Cuban relations with African liberation movements, in general”, and with the Angolan MPLA, in particular. It also ignored “Cuba’s persistently independent approach throughout the 1960s”, as Antoni Kapcia remarks. This fact leads Kapcia “to find it difficult to accept that Castro, having survived Soviet pressure and having stressed Cuban independence and nationalism for so long, would, overnight, allow the

4. Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels”, *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, n° 1 & n° 2, 2008, p. 2.

5. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina University Press, 2002.

Russians to dictate that Cuban soldiers should fight, and die, for purely Soviet objectives”<sup>6</sup>.

Although the presence of Cubans in Angola in 1975 came as a “total surprise” to some (at least to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, as he confessed in his memoirs)<sup>7</sup>, the relationship between both countries was not new and it had indeed grown stronger from the early 1960s, when several African countries began their decolonization processes, this included the Portuguese-speaking ones, which by 1961 were embarking in a revolutionary uprising against Lisbon’s rule. By the mid-1960s, Cuban support to liberation movements in Portuguese Africa could be translated into a moral commitment to revolution or guerrilla warfare based on socialist ideology (like Amílcar Cabral’s PAIGC movement in Guinea-Bissau, MPLA in Angola or FRELIMO in Mozambique), a commitment that should also be understood in the realms of an anti-imperialist, anti-US hegemony struggle, allied to a criticism of US domestic policy concerning the Civil Rights movement or the intervention in Vietnam. Likewise, it was well-known that Che Guevara had been undercover in the Congo (in 1965), where he trained and met several members of the MPLA in exile (namely Agostinho Neto and the famous guerrilla figure Hoji Ya Henda)<sup>8</sup>, who were organizing guerrilla attacks in Zaire and in the north of Angola (against the Portuguese army), with the support of Brazzaville<sup>9</sup>.

Most of these facts could be insignificant – and indeed they were quite marginal when compared to the Cuban presence (and official support for guerrilla movements) in neighbouring countries in Latin America – if Havana had not hosted the First Tricontinental Conference in 1966. The “Tri” gathered in Cuba over 500 delegates from the “Non-Aligned Movement” and liberation parties from Asia, Africa and the Americas, in an international solidarity movement in favour of pressing decolonization processes, and against US imperialism and polarised international policies in the Cold War context (US and USSR). As Manuel Barcia points out, “the vast majority of the delegates clamoured for more collaboration, more support, and more demonstrations of revolutionary internationalism”<sup>10</sup>.

6. Antoni Kapcia, “Cuba’s African involvement: a new perspective”, *Survey*, vol. 24, n° 2, Spring, 1979, p. 145.

7. “‘The intervention of Cuban combat forces came as a total surprise’, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoirs”: Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

8. Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale*, Abingdon, Frank Cass, 2005, p. 28.

9. Jorge Risquet (member of the Central Committee of the PCC, was the head of the Cuban civilian mission in Angola from 1976) led the “Patrice Lumumba’s battalion”, Che’s second column in the Congo and corroborates this story in his memoirs. J. Risquet, *El Segundo frente del Che en el Congo: historia del batallón Patrice Lumumba*, Havana, Abril, 2000.

10. Manuel Barcia, “‘Locking horns with the Northern Empire’: anti-American imperialism at the Tricontinental Conference of 1966 in Havana”, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 7, n° 3, September, 2009, p. 211.

Although Agostinho Neto and Hoji Ya Henda were in Havana that January in 1966, it was Guinea-Bissau's charismatic fighter Amílcar Cabral who caught the world's attention and, with his speech against colonialism and Portuguese racial politics, transatlantic movements and post-slavery relationships, paved the way to Cuba's future strategy concerning Portuguese African countries.

Before Fidel Castro's iconic speech in which he recalled the Cuban movement to Angola as a "return of the slaves" to Africa <sup>11</sup>, Amílcar Cabral emphasised that same bond in 1966:

"Taking once again the formerly hard and tragic path of our ancestors (mainly from Guinea and Angola) who were *taken to Cuba as slaves*, we would come now as free men, as willing workers and Cuban patriots, to fulfil a productive function in this new, just and multi-racial society, and to help and defend with our own lives the victories of the Cuban people. Thus we would strengthen both all the *bonds of history, blood and culture which unite our peoples with the Cuban people*, and the spontaneous giving of oneself, the deep joy and infectious rhythm which make the *construction of socialism* in Cuba a new phenomenon for the world, a unique and, for many, unaccustomed event" <sup>12</sup>.

Cabral was also stressing that the relations between Africa and Cuba, initiated during the slave trade, should now become more solid if African countries undergoing independence processes saw Cuba's revolution as an example to follow.

## 2. International solidarity

Guinea-Bissau's leader left Havana with the promise of future support from Cuba, later translated into military and ideological training (both in Africa and in Cuba), and civilian collaborations (Cuba sent over forty doctors to Guinea-Bissau <sup>13</sup>) during the country's liberation war against the Portuguese (from 1965 to 1974). The same occurred with Angola's MPLA – some of its members also studied and trained in Cuba – and other African countries (namely Algeria). Cuba's influence in Africa was spreading, but by then solidarity with the continent was part of a wider network of support that still had its main focus in Latin America. At the Tricontinental,

"Castro promised that any revolutionary movement anywhere in the world could count on Cuba's unconditional support. [...] 'The struggle in Latin

11. Fidel Castro, *Fidel Castro Speeches – Cuba's Internationalist Foreign Policy 1975-80* (vol. 1), New York, Pathfinder, 1981, p. 107.

12. Amílcar Cabral, *The Weapon of Theory*: <http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/cabral/1966/weapon-theory.htm> [accessed 17/02/2014]. Italics are my own.

13. According to Gleijeses, "more than forty Cuban doctors, most of whom were military, served in Guinea-Bissau", until the country's independence in 1974. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, op. cit., p. 202.



America strengthens its bond of solidarity with the peoples of Asia and Africa' [Castro said]" <sup>14</sup>.

There were, nonetheless, a series of losses that led to a gradual disappointment with the accomplishments of other revolutionary processes abroad, especially in Latin America. First, Che's assassination in Bolivia in 1967 was a harsh setback in the belief in guerrilla warfare as a means to attain a revolution. Guevara's death, writes Kapcia, "was a blow to Cuban morale at a difficult time, leading to national mourning, the making of a myth of the figure of 'Che' and a sense of disillusion; the campaign [support for Latin American guerrilla and leftist movements] had visibly failed" <sup>15</sup>. Secondly, although the world's Left was briefly galvanised by Salvador Allende's election in 1970, the 1973 US-backed military coup in Chile, and the resulting death of Allende, literally destroyed the possibility of achieving a "realistic prospect of power by less dangerous and costly means than the earlier guerrilla strategy" <sup>16</sup>.

The idea that Cuba was "exporting the Revolution" to Latin America was widely defended by US officials, as Gleijeses points out, and it was precisely the fact that Cuba could not abandon its support for armed guerrillas in the continent – "evidently revolution is their *raison d'être* as political beings" <sup>17</sup> – that hindered the possibility of a truce between Cuba and the US. Interestingly, quoting the same document, the greatest threat of this Cuban "export" was not its military or subversive aspect, but its ideological one:

"The primary danger we face in Castro is not what he [Castro] does in the way of distributing arms, disseminating propaganda, training subversives, and dispatching agents, but in the impact the very existence of his regime has upon the leftist movement in many Latin American countries" <sup>18</sup>.

The US was perhaps not seeing the whole picture (hence Kissinger's "surprise" in 1975), because the accomplishments of the Cuban revolution were already being admired across the Atlantic, even before Cuba considered the "export" of its "revolutionary model" to Africa. Note that Amílcar Cabral's "bedside table" book was Che Guevara's instruction manual, *La Guerra de Guerrillas* <sup>19</sup>. Following on from the influences of the Negritude movement, besides poets like the Cuban Nicolás Guillén, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro figured

14. Antoni Kapcia, « Cuba's African involvement », art. cit., p. 149.

15. Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba in Revolution – a history since the fifties*, London, Reaktikon, 2008, p. 119.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

17. Document from the US State Department's Policy Planning Council in 1964, quoted in Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, op. cit., p. 26.

18. *Ibid.*

19. António Tomás, *O fazedor de utopias: uma biografia de Amílcar Cabral*, Lisboa, Tinta-da-China, 2007.

prominently in revolutionary poetry in Guinea-Bissau and Angola during the 1960s <sup>20</sup>.

When Salvador Allende died in 1973, Castro had already accomplished his first African tour (in 1972, visiting Guinea, Sierra Leone and Algeria). At home, Kapcia states, the revolution “had also begun to develop a wider ‘Third Worldism’, an awareness of the colonial and post-colonial world beyond Latin America” <sup>21</sup>. Therefore the deployment of Cuban instructors to Angola in the summer of 1975, when the South African army invaded Angola through its southern border, should not have come as a total surprise: Neto had visited Cuba on July 26<sup>th</sup> 1974, merely three months after the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship – and so did the Portuguese High Commissioner for Angola’s transition into independence, a prominent left-wing military officer, António Rosa Coutinho, who would be in charge of the decolonisation process. As the first delegation of Cubans that entered Angola in early 1975 attest, Rosa Coutinho knew the Cubans were in Angola (by then it was still a Portuguese territory), “looking into helping the MPLA” <sup>22</sup>.

As the belligerent atmosphere preceding the civil war escalated in the summer of 1975, more Cuban military instructors were sent to Angola in order to train the FAPLA (Angola’s Armed Forces). The “intervention” as such only occurred in October that year, when around 2 000 Cubans disembarked in Luanda, a few weeks before the announced independence day, November 11<sup>th</sup>, and fought until exhaustion on the side of the MPLA against CIA-supported FNLA and South African-backed UNITA, the two other liberation movements in Angola. As the battle for the taking of Luanda was won by the FAPLA, with the invaluable support of the Cubans, MPLA’s leader Agostinho Neto unilaterally proclaimed Angola’s independence from Portugal. The conflicts continued until March 1976 when the first truce was declared and the South African army withdrew from the southern border. Only then did the Cubans send the first groups of doctors and teachers, the *brigadistas* that departed to Africa in *misión* for periods of approximately two years.

Although it was known that the Cubans were in Angola, Fidel Castro only spoke of the issue to the nation in his December 1975 closing speech to the First Party Congress:

“When the Angolan people were about to attain independence [...] imperialism worked out a way to crush the revolutionary movement in Angola. They planned to take hold of Cabinda, with its oil, before November 11; to seize Luanda before November 11. And to carry out this scheme, the US government launched South African troops against Angola. [...] Everything was

20. Namely in Jofre Rocha’s poems written between 1962 and 1970, though only published after Angola’s independence: Jofre Rocha, *Assim se fez madrugada: canções do povo e da revolução*, Porto, Asa, 1977.

21. Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba in Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

22. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

ready to take over Angola before November 11. And the plan was very solid; the only thing was that the plan failed. They had not counted on international solidarity”<sup>23</sup>.

As a result, rather than a military “intervention”<sup>24</sup> *per se*, the relationship between Cuba and Angola in 1975-1976 was on the realms of first, a military, and then, civilian partnership or collaboration. Like Gleijeses, Kapcia also rejects the “Soviet proxy” theory by emphasising aspects of internal factions inside Cuba and the country’s foreign policy in the 1970s. The historian addresses Cuba’s

“African involvement as the result of the victory of two of these factions – the ‘fidelista’ faction, seeing it [presence in Angola] as an opportunity to gain international leverage for Cuba, and the ‘military mission’ faction, seeing it as an opportunity to gain prestige, equipment for the FAR [Cuban Armed Forces] from the Soviet Union, and political strength within Cuba, in addition to valuable combat experience. Thus, the Angolan episode is seen mostly as a weapon in internal struggles, which will produce ‘more volatile foreign policy’ in the future”<sup>25</sup>.

From the people’s perspective, however, after the aforementioned failure of revolutionary processes in Latin America, the death of Guevara and the Chilean coup, many Cubans saw in Angola a possibility of replicating, with the same enthusiasm as in the early years of their own 1959 revolution, another successful uprising. Angola would not represent a “repetition” of what previously happened in Cuba. Now, in the spirit of internationalism and solidarity, the Cubans were not “exporting” their revolution as such, but the same revolutionary ideals that had galvanized Cuba 16 years before. Angola gave the Cuban people the self-assurance that somewhere in Africa the same values of anti-colonial resistance and anti-imperialist struggle were flourishing.

Angola thus represented an alternative narrative to the submersion of the country in the *quinquenio gris*,<sup>26</sup> to the extent that, as it has been documented, the mobilization of thousands of men and women to Angola allowed Cuba to instigate a national reflection about identity and revolutionary values<sup>27</sup>. “Despite the more orthodox and apparently ‘Sovietized’ ethos that seemed to prevail in the new

23. Fidel Castro, *Speeches*, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

24. Borrowing Edward George’s words *The Cuban intervention in Angola*.

25. Antoni Kapcia, “Cuba’s African involvement”, *art. cit.*, p. 146.

26. It literally means the “grey five years”; it was a period of “retrenchment and intolerance” after 1970, “of sustained cultural austerity” in which “the authorities now seek to define art in strictly political and militant terms”, usually associated with censorship or ideological banishment. See Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba in Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 41 and 61.

27. See Christabelle Peters’s book, *Cuban Identity and the Angolan Experience*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, which explains how the Cuban presence in Angola made Cuba reassess its black roots.

institutionalization” in Cuba, after 1975 it was still possible to “identify the essence of the 1960s Revolution”, states Kapcia:

“‘Activism’ may have declined in Cuba’s Latin American policy, but it became actively channelled into the Angolan involvement, whose essentially voluntarist character was enhanced by its discourse of the ‘return of the slaves’ and its recalling of the *mambí* struggles”<sup>28</sup>.

In and through Angola, Cuba re-imagined itself beyond the realms of the nation, reassessing its black roots and therefore engaging with internationalism as a “praxis of activism”. This national narrative was firstly indicated by Fidel Castro speech about the “return of the slaves” to Africa and later on by texts, testimonies, reportages and memoirs that attest to the same values uniting Angola and Cuba. “Many things bind us to Angola”, Castro stated in a rally on July 26<sup>th</sup> 1976, when Agostinho Neto was visiting the country,

“the cause, common interests, policy, ideology. But we are also united by blood ties. And I mean this in two ways: by the blood of our ancestors and the blood we have shed together in the battlefield”<sup>29</sup>.

On the same note, when Castro visited Angola during his second African tour in 1977, the poster for the rally in Luanda showed a picture of Neto and Castro side by side and the following message: “O que é determinante para a unidade é a ideologia e não a geografia”. Ideology, then, not geography, was fundamental to this renewed relationship with Angola. Cuba was redefining itself as a “Latin African” country, not rejecting completely its role in Latin America but now embracing its African heritage. Internationalism and solidarity thus became the *raison d’être* of Cuban revolutionaries. They were not after “material interests” in Angola, said Fidel Castro vehemently: “We are fulfilling an elementary internationalist duty when we help the Angolan people”<sup>30</sup>.

Internationalism is at the core of Cuba’s history and identity. Before the Angolan experience, the Cubans were all over the world not in a truly diasporic sense, but following on from the proletarian internationalism of the First and Second Communist International led by Lenin. They were in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, as Pablo de la Torriente Brau’s compilation documents;<sup>31</sup> they were in Vietnam in the 1960s (Cuba sent military instructors but there was also cultural

28. *Mambí* (or its plural, *Mambises*) is a guerrilla soldier who fought for Cuban independence against Spain in the Ten Years War (1868-1878) and War of Independence (1895-1898). It is usually associated with Black soldiers, freed or marooned slaves, who joined the independence wars. See Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba in Revolution, op. cit.*, p. 106.

29. Fidel Castro, *Speeches, op. cit.*, p. 107.

30. Fidel Castro, *Speeches, op. cit.*, p. 80.

31. Pablo de la Torriente Brau was a Cuban journalist and foreign correspondent who died in combat, in the outskirts of Madrid, during the Spanish Civil war. See Victor Casaus, *El periodista Pablo: crónicas y otros textos, 1930-1936*, Havana, Letras Cubanas, 1989.

solidarity)<sup>32</sup>. They had been in other Caribbean and South American independence struggles, revolutionary uprisings or sieges since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That “friendship forged with blood”, borrowing Lanie Millar’s words<sup>33</sup>, was not solely established with Africa and under the metaphor of the “return of the slaves”. At the core of Cuba’s independence, internationalism plays a substantial role: without foreign solidarity, perhaps Cuba would not have succeeded in its rebellion against Spanish colonial rule; without the foreign help of Máximo Gómez, the Dominican general who fought in Cuba’s Independence War, perhaps Cuba’s national narrative could not claim internationalism to be at the core of its identity; and, finally, without the contribution of the Argentinian Ernesto Guevara, perhaps the narrative of the Cuban revolution would have been written differently. Guevara himself said that he considered his *patria* not only Argentina but all of America<sup>34</sup> and defended internationalism as an “act of love”<sup>35</sup>, encouraging the revolution by creating “two, three or many Vietnams throughout the world”<sup>36</sup>. With the support of international solidarity, revolutions would create different *foci* of turbulence at the heart of the “empire”. Angola would allow the Cubans to become *internacionalistas* and fulfil the dream of being like Che, a foreigner fighting in a foreign country, helping a brother in the struggle for liberation.

After 1975, the concept of internationalism in Cuba came to be permanently addressed in tandem with those of patriotism and humanism, even when training young children at school. Mónica Sorin Zocolsky analysed Cuban children’s perceptions of solidarity and internationalism and explains, in her doctoral study in sociology, the basic principles of internationalism following on from Guevara’s idea of love:

“En la sociedad socialista, el concepto de patriotismo está esencialmente vinculado al de internacionalismo. El compañero Fidel lo ha expresado en palabras que definen y exhortan: ‘El internacionalismo es la esencia más hermosa del marxismo-leninismo y sus ideales de solidaridad y fraternidad entre los pueblos. Sin el internacionalismo, la Revolución Cubana ni siquiera existiría. Ser internacionalista es saldar nuestra propia deuda con la

32. Cuban intellectuals, journalists, writers and filmmakers travelled to Vietnam from the mid-1960s and documented the war, like Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Cuaderno paralelo*, Havana, Union de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1973; Raul Valdés Vivó, *Embajada en la selva y antes: paralelo 17*, Havana, Inst. de Ciencias Sociales, 1969; or the documentaries directed by Santiago Álvarez, *Hanoi, Martes 13*, 1967 or *Abril de Vietnam o el año del gato*, 1975.

33. Lanie Millar, “A Friendship Forged With Blood: Cuban Literature of the Angolan War”, *Romance Notes*, vol. 52, n° 3, 2012, pp. 325–332.

34. Guevara stated it in an interview to an Argentinian reporter, live from the Sierra Maestra in 1957, in response to the question “aren’t you afraid that your intervention will be regarded as a foreign interference?”, in Eric Luther, Ted Henken, *Critical Lives: Che Guevara*, Indianapolis, Alpha Books, 2001, p. v.

35. Ernesto Che Guevara, “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba”, in: <https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/65-socyh.htm> [accessed 20/02/2014].

36. Ernesto Che Guevara, Message to the Tricontinental Conference, April 1967, in: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1967/04/16.htm> [accessed 17/02/2014].

humanidad.' [...] Nuestra definición operacional del internacionalismo, comprende [among other examples]: [...] sentimientos de amor e identificación hacia los proletarios del mundo, independientemente de su nacionalidad; [...] conocimiento, admiración y solidaridad hacia los pueblos que luchan por su liberación nacional"<sup>37</sup>.

### 3. The "invention of tradition"

Angola fits perfectly this category of internationalism. Consequently, the mobilization of thousands of Cuban men and women to fight for the national liberation of a foreign country with an anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle similar to the Cuban 1959 revolution, could not be totally unforeseen. Mobilization is, thus, the keyword in this context, as Kapcia argues: "Mobilization has, all along, made an essential contribution to Cuba's survival as a revolutionary society; it has indeed created an 'alternative' structure, a means of communication, a form of democracy and a solid and genuine power base"<sup>38</sup>. Kapcia is not suggesting, however, that "mobilization" was the sole purpose of the Angolan experience. Mobilization of the people, with the possibility of improving Cuba's morale, ideologically rooted in the message of internationalism, was not the purpose but the essence of the whole Angolan experience. The author continues: "The development of a new campaign, in Africa [in 1975] – while being undertaken for a variety of other reasons, not least of them Cuba's commitment to revolution in the Third World – must have come as godsend, providing the prospect of a *totally new and exciting mobilization*, a new danger to which to react and a *new boost for Cuban pride*, and a *new set of myths created*"<sup>39</sup>.

This idea of "a new set of myths" is quintessential to the understanding of the relationship between Cuba and Angola and how the Angolan experience was perceived from the Caribbean island. Kapcia uses the concept of myth or mythology not in the sense of illusion, but as "a whole set of images and beliefs that, together, express and reflect the basic reason for being of a group"<sup>40</sup>. That is, to be Cuban and part of the *pueblo* is to be imbedded with a set of principles (or "narratives") that guide the national imagery, be they historical (independence or the

37. ["In a Socialist society, the concept of patriotism is essentially linked to that of internationalism. Comrade Fidel expressed this in words that define and defend it: 'Internationalism is the most beautiful essence of Marxism-Leninism and its ideals of solidarity and brotherhood among peoples. Without internationalism, the Cuban Revolution would not even exist. To be an internationalist is to pay our debt to mankind'. [...] Our operational definition of internationalism comprises [amongst other examples]: [...] feelings of love and identification in relation to the workers of the world, regardless of their nationality; [...] knowledge, admiration and solidarity with the peoples struggling for national liberation."'] Mónica Sorin Zocolsky, *Humanismo, patriotismo e internacionalismo en los escolares cubanos*, Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 1985, pp. 46-47.

38. Antoni Kapcia, "Cuba's African involvement", art. cit., p. 154.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 157. Italics are my own.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

revolution), physical or geographical (the Sierra Maestra for instance) or ideological (internationalism or anti-imperialism).

In order to discuss how the Angolan war allowed Cuba to create a “new set of myths”, one can rely on Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition”. That is not to say that Cuban national narratives were somehow “invented” or pure imagination. Quite the opposite: according to Hobsbawm, even if traditions which “appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented”, in this case the historian implies “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a *ritual or symbolic nature*, which seek to inculcate *certain values and norms of behaviour* by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past”<sup>41</sup>.

In what concerns the historical links between Cuba and Angola, this continuity could be clearly seen in the metaphor of the “return of the slaves” announced by Castro. Again, in the light of Hobsbawm, one should not imply that there was not a “continuity” between the past in which slaves from the kingdom of Congo were brought to the sugar plantations in Cuba and the Americas, and the “present” day in which many Cubans were, generations past, “returning” to Africa. That continuity exists but it is, somehow, forged by those new sets of myths or beliefs created in the grand narrative of Cuban identity. These “traditions” are, Hobsbawm continues, “*responses to novel situations* which take the form of *reference to old situations*, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition”<sup>42</sup>. What makes “invented traditions” interesting in the contemporary setting is the “contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant”<sup>43</sup> – not so much as crystallized by time or as a “continuous” past, but as a set of “images and beliefs” (Kapcia) or a sense of belonging to an “imagined community” (Benedict Anderson)<sup>44</sup>.

#### 4. Transatlantic “communities”

In my interpretation, the following examples account for this “invented tradition” created by Cuba in order to mobilize the *pueblo* in an international solidarity movement with Angola and galvanize the

41. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Invented Traditions”, in Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 1. Italics are my own.

42. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction...”, *op. cit.*, p. 2. Italics are my own.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983.

masses at home in a renewed revolutionary aura. In so doing, Cuba somehow incorporated Angola into its national narrative and imagery and even transformed the Angolan experience as part of its set of myths and beliefs.

Fidel Castro addressed the nation on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory at the Bay of Pigs, known in Cuba as Playa Girón. It occurred in April 1976, when there was a truce in the Angolan war and the Cuban civilian missions were about to leave for Angola. Although commemorating Girón on that day, Castro said, “our people had an additional reason to be proud”, a reason that resulted from “their finest expression of internationalism and transcend the boundaries” of the nation: the “victory of the people of Angola”<sup>45</sup>. As the speech continued, it became clearer in outlining the lineage between Girón and the Angolan civil war (the “African Girón”): Cuba was a receiver of black slaves and Angola a donor of an enslaved workforce; now, as if in repaying a debt, Cuba became a giver of a solidarity force and Angola the beneficiary of that generosity. Yet it also became clearer how Castro, who again mentioned “return of the slaves”, inserted the whole Angolan enterprise in a historical *continuum*, an “invented tradition” in the light of Hobsbawm – “for all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion”<sup>46</sup>.

Castro described the Angolan experience as tantamount to the Cuban Girón:

“The victory in Angola was the twin sister of the victory at Girón. For the Yankee imperialists, Angola represents an African Girón. At one time we said that imperialism had suffered its great defeats in the month of April: Girón, Vietnam, Cambodia. This time the defeat came in March”<sup>47</sup>.

Castro was including Girón in a lineage of struggles against imperialism and, by the same token, including the Angolan war in that “tradition” as well. This message visibly echoes Guevara’s plan to create “one, two, many Vietnams”. However, it also invokes the blood of the foreign ancestors (like Guevara’s, after all) who contributed to Cuba’s present sovereignty:

“At Girón, African blood was shed, that of the descendants of a people who were slaves before they became workers, and who were exploited workers before they became masters of their homeland”<sup>48</sup>.

Castro was thus designing the Cuban historic trajectory in a parallel line to that of the Angolan: first, slavery; then, colonialism. Afterward, independence was not necessarily translated into sovereignty. Only

45. Fidel Castro, *Speeches*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

46. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction...”, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

47. Fidel Castro, *Speeches*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

48. *Ibid.*



after the revolution, when imperialism was finally defeated, could this happen. The very same historic succession of events occurred in Angola. Castro continued:

“Those who once enslaved [a] man and sent him to America perhaps never imagined that one of those peoples who received their slaves would one day send their fighters to struggle for freedom in Africa”<sup>49</sup>.

Cuba and Angola could also be following the same historical path through another parallel between Cuba’s attack to the Moncada barracks, on July 26<sup>th</sup> 1953, and Angola’s first anti-colonial uprising on February 4<sup>th</sup> 1961, when a group of men invaded a prison in Luanda and liberated the political prisoners, an action attributed to the MPLA, an incident that marks the launch of the colonial war against Portugal. Although separated by almost a decade (and by the breadth of the Atlantic), both moments symbolise the beginning of the uprisings against the established rule: Batista in Cuba and the Portuguese in Angola. Accordingly, when the Cubans invoke February 4<sup>th</sup>, and by attributing a Moncada-like feeling to the Angolan uprising,<sup>50</sup> they are blatantly highlighting a parallel between Cuba’s revolutionary struggle and Angola’s anti-colonial rebellion, suggesting even that Angola’s independence could be, in an African context, what the Cuban revolution had been for the Americas.

Another example of an “invented tradition” was also brought up by Castro: a similarity drawn between Agostinho Neto and José Martí,<sup>51</sup> both writers, poets, father-figures of Angola and Cuba, respectively, who suffered in prison and in exile before they could see their countries liberated:

“Just as Martí wrote many of his best books, including most of his best poetry, amidst suffering [...] so did Neto write most of his best poetry amidst his suffering and exile and as a result of the slavery of his brothers and sisters. Martí and Neto have been makers of countries”<sup>52</sup>.

A genealogy is thus established, and Angolan traditions are consequently included in the national Cuban narrative. Castro himself “announced” them and, therefore, others could follow his lead, mobilized by this opportunity of becoming internationalists, renewing their revolutionary ideals, almost two decades after the beginning of the Cuban revolution.

49. *Ibid.*

50. See Milton Díaz Canter, *La epopeya de Angola*, television series for Cubavisión, 2007.

51. José Martí was one of the most important writers of 19<sup>th</sup> century’s Cuba and one of the mentors of Cuban independence against Spain. Agostinho Neto, the leader of the MPLA (and later first President of Angola), was a doctor and a poet who studied in Portugal and returned to Angola to fight for the country’s independence.

52. Fidel Castro, *Speeches*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

The Colombian writer and journalist Gabriel García Márquez went to Angola in 1976 and his long reportage *Operación Carlota*, which was later published in several languages, follows Castro's genealogy<sup>53</sup>. *Carlota* was the title of the Cuban military operation in Angola which took its name from a former slave woman who led a rebellion in the Triunvirato sugar mill, in Matanzas, in 1873. *Carlota* was later captured and violently killed but her rebellion and death became a symbol of resistance and her image an icon against slavery in Cuba. Again, it is not a coincidence that the Cuban military mission in Angola appropriated the name of a former slave who rebelled against the establishment.

García Márquez's narrative fittingly borrows a set of Cuban myths and translates them into the context of the Angolan venture. Of these, the most significant is the comparison between the boat which transported the first Cuban contingent to Angola – the *Vietnam Heroico* (history repeating itself or “tradition” constantly being “re-invented”) – and the *Granma*, the boat that took Castro, Guevara, Cienfuegos and Raul Castro, amongst 82 others, from Mexico to Cuba in 1956; after the landing of the boat (and the following bloodbath), several of them settled in the Sierra Maestra and began the guerrilla warfare that paved the way for the revolution in 1959. García Márquez describes Castro's farewell to the Cuban contingents departing to Angola, “y después de ver las condiciones en que viajaban soltó una frase muy suya que sin embargo parecía casual. ‘De todos modos – dijo [Castro] – van más cómodos que en el Granma’”<sup>54</sup>. Perhaps the *Vietnam Heroico* was more comfortable than the *Granma*, but certainly not more comfortable than the special flight by Cubana de Aviación which took the first contingent to Angola by air: it was an old Bristol Britannia plane and, according to García Márquez, “los pasajeros, que recuerdan muy bien haber sido 82 porque era el mismo número de hombres del ‘Granma’, tenían un saludable aspecto de turistas tostados por el sol del Caribe”<sup>55</sup>. By air or by boat, the *Granma* (and its symbolic value) was sailing again, this time towards Angola.

As the conflict ceased and the civilian brigades travelled to Angola, more and more parallels between both countries were being noted every week in the Cuban public sphere. Upon arriving in Havana in 1976, García Márquez described some changes that Angola had “introduced” in Cuba:

53. Gabriel García Márquez, *Operación Carlota*, Lima, Mosca Azul, 1977.

54. Gabriel García Márquez, *Operación*, op. cit., p. 10. [“At any rate”, he [Castro] said, “you’ll be more comfortable than on the Granma.” Gabriel García Márquez, *Operation Carlota*, translated by Patrick Camiller, *New Left Review*, 1/101-102, January-April 1977].

55. *Ibid.*, p. 16. Italics are my own. [“The passengers remember clearly being a total of eighty-two, since there were the same number on board the Granma [...] they had the look of healthy tourists roasted by the Caribbean sun.” Gabriel García Márquez, *Operation Carlota*, translated by Patrick Camiller, op. cit.].

"Había una nueva moda masculina de vestidos enteros de tela ligera con chaquetas de manga corta. Había novedades de palabras portuguesas en la lengua callejera. Había nuevos acentos en los viejos acentos africanos de la música popular. Había discusiones más ruidosas que de costumbre en las colas de las tiendas y en los autobuses atestados, entre quienes habían sido partidarios resueltos de la acción en Angola y quienes apenas entonces empezaban a comprenderla" <sup>56</sup>.

Interesting analogies between Cuban and Angolan histories could be drawn from a closer reading of Cuban magazines such as *Verde Olivo* (military) and *Bohemia* (cultural, social) from this period (especially 1976-1977). It is quite remarkable how, from 1976 onwards, Angola essentially takes over the USSR and the Eastern European "fellow" countries as a national interest in those magazines. Several issues about the first great harvests in independent Angola (coffee, banana, etc.) resemble analogous campaigns in the 1960s in Cuba, after the revolution; <sup>57</sup> the same occurs with the capture of foreign mercenaries in Cuba after the Bay of Pigs: an issue of *Verde Olivo* included a long article about the foreign mercenaries captured in Angola in 1976 and showed pictures of these men with striking similarities to those of Playa Girón, enumerating their names and nationalities, shamed in public as the face of the enemy <sup>58</sup>.

Poets and other writers, authors of personal accounts of their experiences in Angola also followed Castro's lead and incorporated their national (sometimes personal) narrative into that of the Angolan, and vice-versa, shrinking the distance covered by the Atlantic. In the mid-90s, Don Burness <sup>59</sup> compiled a series of testimonies written by Cubans who were internationalists in Angola during the 1970s. These texts follow a long tradition of testimony in revolutionary Cuba and they articulate first-hand war experiences of these soldiers committed to the socialist revolution in Angola.

Benito Estrada Fernández was one of them and (re)created in his laudatory poem, *Del Turquino hasta el Cunene* (1979), this large transatlantic space of internationalism and solidarity, transported by the Cuban soldiers in the boats towards Angola. In his poems, the Atlantic becomes an uninterrupted community: Turquino is the highest peak in the Sierra Maestra; Cunene is the River along the southern border

56. *Ibid.*, p. 31. [There was a new men's fashion for lightweight suits with short-sleeved jackets; Portuguese words had found their way into the latest slang; old African strains reappeared in new popular tunes. There were more lively discussions than usual in the shop queues and crowded buses, between those who had been determined partisans of the Angola action and those who were only now beginning to grasp its full significance." Gabriel García Márquez, *Operation Carlota*, translated by Patrick Camiller *op. cit.*].

57. Hector De Arturo, "La primera zafra del pueblo", *Verde Olivo*, n° 28, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 1976, pp. 8-9.

58. Hector De Arturo, "El Juicio de Luanda", *Verde Olivo*, n° 26, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1976, pp. 12-16.

59. Don Burness, *On the Shoulders of Martí: Cuban literature of the Angolan war*, Colorado Springs, Three Continents Press, 1996.

between Angola and Namibia. Estrada's poem echoes deliberately the Angolan national anthem which sings "de Cabinda ao Cunene, um só povo, uma só nação" [From Cabinda to Cunene, one people only, one nation only]. Most of his verses recall the difficulty crossing the Atlantic Ocean by boat from Cuba to Angola, as if the now freed slaves were to go back to Africa in order to liberate the oppressed "mother country". But they also resonate with the enthusiasm experienced by the Cubans during those years in which a new revolution was possible in a "tierra hermana" across the Atlantic, as if it was not just the Cuban soldier who was going to Angola, but the whole of Cuba – its myths, its beliefs, its revolutionary utopia, its black heritage, and the green hills of the Sierra Maestra:

"Hasta pronto, ¡madre Sierra!  
 ¡Ya tu altura el cielo muere  
 y de mis ojos se pierde  
 tu color de verde tierra!  
 ¡ Hasta pronto, que la guerra  
 me llama para hacer paz:  
 pronto, muy pronto estarás  
 conmigo en la tierra hermana  
 y de la sierra angolana  
 un continente serás" <sup>60</sup>.

For more than 30 years, after his return from Angola, Estrada collected accounts from his comrades from Camagüey province who also went to Angola in the first contingents, during 1975 and 1976. The result was the book *Combatientes del Mayor* <sup>61</sup>, published in three volumes: it includes interviews with over a thousand internationalists and it dialogues interestingly with Estrada's own diaries from the war period. By giving voice to the anonymous soldier, his book is letting history be told not as a monolithic entity, narrated by the winners of the Angolan war (the generals, the commanders or the powerful members of the FAR), but by the ordinary soldier who, by becoming an internationalist, was fulfilling his duty towards the revolution. Internationalists were therefore part of the *pueblo*: they could be high-ranking military officials or bakers; regardless of their profession, their social background or their colour and despite their gender, as Raul Valdés Vivó posited, internationalists were

60. ["See you soon, mother *Sierra*! / Your hills are now covered by the sky / And from my eyes / I lose the sight of your green land! / See you soon, that war / calls me to make peace: / Very soon you will be / with me in sister land / and from the Angolan hills / a continent you will be."] Benito Estrada Fernández, *Del Turquino hasta el Cunene*, Havana, Letras Cubanas, 1979, p. 7.

61. Benito Estrada Fernández, *Combatientes del Mayor*, vol. 1, 2, 3, Camaguey, Editorial Acana, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

“constructores, chóferes, tractoristas, campesinos, médicos, periodistas, trabajadores con ropa verde olivo, estudiantes, enfermeras [...] los anti-mercenarios: profundos, románticos de la revolución, abnegados, sencillos, solidarios”<sup>62</sup>,

When I interviewed Benito Estrada in Camagüey in 2012, he stated that his intention with *Del Turquino hasta el Cunene* was, indeed, to “export” the ideals of the Cuban revolution to Angola. He admitted that Cuba was, in the 1970s, re-assessing its African and black identity. In the preface to his three-volume compilation, he naturally articulates links between Cuba and Africa by mentioning, for example, the “Angolanisms” in the poetry of the local (and national) Camagüeyan black poet, Nicolás Guillén, or the geographical names that recall Angola and the presence of slaves in his province: Cafemba, Avari, Macuto, Congo, Mongolé, Lunaco, Casimba; or even names of musical instruments or cultural objects, like bongó, marimba, xindonga, quimbe. Benito Estrada’s words reminds us how the Angolan experience questioned “the significance of internationalism in Africa for both race relations at home and ties with the regional black/West African diasporas”<sup>63</sup>, fostering a domestic discussion about – and a reassessment of – Cuba’s African heritage.

In Angola, Cuban authors and intellectuals like Víctor Casaus, Waldo Leyva, Fernando Pérez or Silvio Rodríguez were internationalists, as soldiers or integrated in artistic brigades. Their poetry, songs and films from the period reflect their experiences in Africa with the same patriotic tone of the Cuban accounts of the 1960s which accompanied the revolutionary years, the Bay of Pigs or the literacy campaigns. For their generation (especially that of Pérez and Rodríguez), Angola and internationalism meant the opportunity to serve the revolution as their parents’ generation had, since they were too young to do so in 1959. This view is conveyed in the Latin America Political Report of 1978, as cited in Kapcia:

“The African initiative has involved a whole generation of young Cubans who are not old enough to remember the Missile Crisis, the Bay of Pigs, or the literacy campaigns. [...] More than 700 young schoolteachers are now flying out to Angola, and it is no accident that Granma, the Communist Party daily, is *comparing them to the literacy campaigners* who worked in the Escambray mountains”<sup>64</sup>.

62. [“builders, drivers, truck drivers, farmers, doctors, journalists, olive green-clothed workers, students, nurses [...] the anti-mercenary: deep, revolutionary romantics, devoted, simple, caring.”] Raul Valdés Vivó, *Fin del mito de los mercenarios*, Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 1978, p. 127.

63. Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba, Island of Dreams*, New York, Berg, 2000, p. 199.

64. *Latin America Political Report*, vol. 10, n° 14, April, 1978, p. 110 cited in Antoni Kapcia, “Cuba’s African involvement...”, art. cit., p. 157. Italics are my own.

The months in 1976 when the singer and songwriter Silvio Rodríguez was in Angola, alongside other leaders of the cultural movement *Nueva Trova*, are recalled in an interview with Estrella Fresnillo, a report about internationalism and its meaning to Cubans. Apparently, Rodríguez wanted to fight like a soldier and was very disappointed when he was told that his mission was merely cultural:

“Seguimos desalentados porque nosotros formamos parte de una generación que lleva el peso moral de la generación del Moncada. Si bien crecimos en momentos cruciales, no tuvimos la oportunidad que otros tuvieron en el hacer por la patria. Por eso nos sentíamos de esa manera”<sup>65</sup>.

The “moral weight” of Cuban history was thus being carried to Angola, to borrow Burness’s words, “on the shoulders” of Rodríguez and his generation.

## Conclusion

Interest in the Cuban presence in Africa has been rising in the last decade: the pioneering work of Piero Gleijeses broke new grounds for scholars in Cultural Studies to pursue other angles of research, amongst others the study of the cultural impact of the Cuban presence in Angola, which can contribute to an understanding of how memories of that encounter could inform culture and identity in post-war Angola and today’s Cuba.

If, throughout the 1990s, the Angola topic was pretty much dormant in Cuban society (and the Cuban presence was also absent from the public sphere in an Angola submerged in the civil war until 2002), the 2000s, on the contrary, was a fertile decade for the contemporary manifestation of the aforementioned “Angola syndrome” in Cuban society – syndromes often are latent and concealed, waiting for a trigger to awaken them. As Gleijeses posited, concerning the “culture of silence” that slowly began to be broken by Cuban authorities, “had the Cuban government maintained the wall of silence, the foot soldiers would never had spoken. But as the government softened its position, many stepped forward. They were proud of their past, and they wanted it to be recorded”<sup>66</sup>.

Anniversaries that occurred in the 2000s – the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Che Guevara’s journey to Africa, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of *Operación Carlota* in 2005 and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 2007 – propelled commemorative manifestations

65. [“We are disappointed because we are part of a generation that carries the moral weight of the Moncada generation. Although we grew up in crucial moments, we did not get the opportunities that others had to do something for their country. That’s why we felt that way.”] Estrella Fresnillo, *En otras tierras del mundo*, Havana, Gente Nueva, 1982, p. 37.

66. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

(in the cultural realm they were extensive) which have indeed awakened the dormant experiences of Cuban men and women whose memories are today offering a new understanding of what, in the words of Michael Rothberg, “has remained unconscious and inarticulable” in the Cuban public sphere for so many years <sup>67</sup>.

For many Cubans, Angola was the last great moment of Cuba’s history, a moment when the little island of the Caribbean still mattered in foreign affairs, at the heyday of the Cold War. With Angola, there was a breath of hope coming to Cuba from across the Atlantic in a moment when, both at home and abroad, the idea of revolution became more and more distant.

After Angola, there was the *special period*, after the collapse of the USSR a gradual discrediting of the revolution and more isolation. For many Cubans, Angola meant the possibility of travelling abroad for the first time; getting a promotion at work; fulfilling a duty towards the *patria* or risking their lives in the savannah by avoiding another year of military service. Not all Cubans deal equally with the national pride or the hidden trauma of war. There is a patriotic choir of pride for the end of apartheid in South Africa, or the independence of Namibia, but a great deal of silence and shame around the Ochoa trial in 1989 <sup>68</sup>. That “wall of silence” was also due to some resentment towards Angola, and how the African country responded during the 1990s (when Cuba was struggling to survive) to the abnegated solidarity offered by the Cubans in the 1970s and 1980s.

However, by outlining the relationships between Cuba and Angola through several decades, and highlighting the importance of internationalism to Cuba from the 1970s onwards, it could be concluded that Angola was not indeed part of a Cuban “re-colonizing” strategy, nor were the Cubans “exporting” its socialist model and becoming the “good colonizers” in Africa. On the contrary, Cuba was perhaps learning from the Angolan experience how to address issues that had remained silent for so long – such as race and black heritage. Angola also served the purpose of galvanizing internally a mass of people who, by 1975, could have been on the verge of falling out with the revolutionary project. Internationalism thus became the face of activism and mobilization. Through a laborious process of an “invention of a tradition”, the drawing of parallels between Cuba and Angola’s histories, the insertion of Angola in the Cuban national narrative and the motto of the “return of the slaves” to Africa, Cuba was indeed rewriting its own idea of a revolution-in-progress.

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67. Michael Rothberg, « Between Auschwitz and Algeria: Multidirectional Memory and the Counterpublic Witness », *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, n° 1, Autumn, 2006, p. 173.

68. General Arnaldo Ochoa was a national hero in Cuba and the Head of the Military Mission to Angola between 1987 and 1988. Upon his return to Cuba he was accused of corruption, drug-trafficking and of establishing links between the Cuban Army and the cartel of the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. Ochoa was tried and executed in 1989.